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Managing Internal Administrative Change*

Joseph A. Custer**

Mr. Custer considers the impact of already instituted internal administrative change on library staff and how best to deal with it. He approaches the topic by describing what his own library did when faced with significant internal administrative restructuring.

¶1 Many types of changes are transpiring in law libraries today. Some are the result of external forces occurring totally outside the library or its parent institution. Pressures from technology and major changes in the publication and distribution of legal information are prime examples. Changes of this sort and their impact on law libraries have been covered extensively in the literature.¹

¶2 The type of change addressed in this article, however, is *internal* organizational change, that is, change in the library or the parent institution that is brought on by restructuring that has already taken place. Thus, I am not talking about how the law library or its personnel manage when new technology is developed or deployed (e.g., personal computers on every desktop), or when methods of accessing legal literature are revamped (e.g., introduction of the Internet). Rather, this article deals with how library personnel manage in the face of restructuring that is going on right around them.

¶3 An example of such restructuring is the addition of more staff to a law school library. Perhaps the dean of the law school wants the library to create a librarian/faculty research liaison program in which each reference librarian will

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1. See, e.g., Elizabeth Day, *Applications of Computers in the Legal Profession: A Selected Bibliography*, LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES Q., Spring 1983, at 75; Fritz Snyder, *The Impact of New Technologies on Law Library Acquisitions*, LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES Q., Fall-Winter 1986, at 159; Scott Finet, *The Impact of Technology on Law Library Collection Growth and Space Requirements*, LEGAL REFERENCE SERVICES Q., Spring 1992, at 73; Joseph W. Thomas, *Cataloging Reform: An Overview for Academic Law Librarians*, 85 L. LIBR. J. 99 (1993); Kathie Belgum, *Law School Library Organization in the Age of Computers*, 85 L. LIBR. J. 329 (1993); Pamela Bluh, *The Winds of Change: Acquisitions for a New Century*, 88 L. LIBR. J. 90 (1996); Mark E. Estes, *Managing Information*, TRENDS L. LIBR. MGMT. & TECH., Oct./Dec. 1996, at 1. Joan S. Howland, *Survival in the Cyberjungle*, TRENDS L. LIBR. MGMT. & TECH., Apr. 1998, at 1.

be directly assigned to assist three or four professors. To undertake this program, two additional reference librarians will need to be hired. In the face of this restructuring, the librarians will need to “manage” several types of change. There will be adjustments in general duties, scheduling, resource utilization, and the like. The new program will also require adjusting to a new responsibility, that of supporting the research and teaching endeavors of specific faculty members.

¶4 Conversely, restructuring may involve the loss of library personnel. For example, in a cost-savings measure, the management committee of a large law firm may decide to reduce library personnel by 25 percent. The library, already working at a minimal staff level, will lose two more workers. The increased workload and feelings of rejection wrought by such a restructuring will (or should) raise “managing” the change in this situation to the highest level of priority.

¶5 Other types of restructuring are more directly administrative. For example, in the law school environment, change that requires “managing” inevitably occurs when the school hires a new dean or a new law library director. Court library personnel face the same situation when a new judge takes office, as do private librarians when a law firm replaces the director of administration.

¶6 While most workers faced with an internal organizational restructuring do not experience the trauma of a colossal change like losing their job, they still experience change in a very direct way. Workers going through change will worry about their own careers and are likely to face a difficult period of adjustment. An internal organizational change period might take a year or longer. While the personal cost cannot be discounted, on an institutional level it is important to recognize that failure to manage internal change well keeps an organization from *benefitting* from the change—which was the purpose for doing it in the first place.

The “Phases” Approach to Managing Change

¶7 Change involves phases, and how well the phases are managed determines the level of successful change. Management consultant William Bridges says there are three phases to what he calls transition, each with differing psychological overtones. “Transition is the psychological process people go through to come to terms with the new situation. Change is external, transition is internal . . . [and] . . . unless transition occurs, change will not work.”² Bridges feels that a great deal can be done to manage the transition period, that managers have significant control over how change will be dealt with. Managers should not overlook the “people” issues, as soft as that may seem. Managers must be able to manage transition to support the growth of the organization. Bridges feels that a manager’s attitude is very important. According to Bridges, a manager unwilling to put forth the

2. WILLIAM BRIDGES, *MANAGING TRANSITIONS: MAKING THE MOST OF CHANGE* 3–4 (1991).

effort to deal with the various “hassles” of change is likely to face an eventual workplace decay. “Failure to manage transition is really a shortcut that costs much more than it saves. For it leaves behind a fatigued and demoralized workforce at the very time when everyone agrees that the only way American organizations can be successful is to get more out of their employees.”³

¶8 By seeing the process of change as one that involves going through a series of specific and identifiable “phases,” we can be more successful in bringing about positive new behavior in our workers. In this article I explore this approach to managing change in part by introducing some of its theoretical construct, but mainly by illustrating the theory with the concrete example of what happened—and why—at my own institution, the University of Kansas School of Law Library.

¶9 In the remainder of this article, I will explore the use of the phases approach to managing internal administrative change by briefly describing each of the phases identified by Bridges and illustrating them with the actual experience of the KU Law Library, showing how one institution proceeded through these phases when faced with changes resulting from its own restructuring.

Phase One—“Endings”

¶10 The first phase centers on “endings.”⁴ This is a period in which employees watch themselves and others try to cope with a recent organizational or administrative change. An old way of doing things has come to an end and a new way is just beginning. According to Bridges, during this first stage, management must give workers a reasonable explanation of why the steps leading to the change have been (or are being) taken, “not just talk about the endings.”⁵ I agree with Bridges: workers need clarity. They need to know why things are being changed and they need to know the consequences. Stated differently, the workers need to know what is in it for them. Yes, many workers are loyal to their organization, and I am not underestimating the strength of that loyalty by using the phrase “what is in it for them.” However, even loyalty of great strength will be sorely tested if leaders do not explain what is happening to the organization or to the individuals in the organization—whether it is good or bad. Unfortunately, too often there are few or even no explanations given to workers of the how, why, and when in this critical phase.

¶11 At the University of Kansas School of Law Library we experienced significant change for some time, the result of a single internal administrative change in the library director position. While not producing the same degree of change

3. *Id.* at 124.

4. *Id.* at 19.

5. *Id.* at 29.

that can come from major structural reorganization, a change in top administration can still be a real test of character. The director of the law library left after fifteen years at the helm to take another director position.⁶ The effect his departure had on the library staff was profound. The predominant attitude of our staff during this first phase of the change we faced may be best characterized as the “we no longer have the bearded guy as director” period. We did not know who the next director would be, but we did know for sure that it was not going to be the bearded guy. (There was a going-away party that verified his departure.) Early in the process of changing directors, the dean of the law school explained the “how’s, when’s, and why’s.” The law library staff appreciated the dean’s efforts during this first stage, even though many things remained up in the air. It was still crucial, however, that the dean provide whatever information was available. As Donna Bennett states, “ensuring that everyone in the library receives information about the upcoming change is vital to its success. Having more information than is needed is always preferable to not having enough.”⁷

¶12 As more information becomes available, it also needs to be shared with the affected parties. In our case, the dean did communicate with the library staff early in the process that he was bringing back the retired former associate director to the law school library to work part-time on special projects. Even aside from how helpful this was in meeting an immediate need for personnel simply to get work done, this action helped bolster a “shaken” phase-one staff by providing continuity and stability when it was most needed. (In our situation, it extended into the second phase as well.)

¶13 In one private sector example of which I am aware, matters did not go nearly as smoothly in the first phase of internal administrative change caused by the hiring of a new director of administration. In a meeting of the law firm’s administrative managers, the new director responded that “there are certain things that you do not need to know!” when asked about the “how, when, and why” of the restructuring that was taking place. The ensuing silence left the middle managers thinking the worst. One manager told me that he felt like Tom Cruise with spittle on his face after Jack Nicholson let him have it in the pivotal “You can’t handle the truth!” scene in the film *A Few Good Men*. Without information to pass on to their staff, the middle managers found it very difficult to keep up morale. There was a feeling that only the “top rank” had value and were capable of handling important information. Needless to say, the mid- and lower-level employees of the law firm did not pass through the first phase of change very quickly or easily.

6. I would be remiss in my personal regard for Peter C. Schanck, our former director, if I did not take this opportunity to state that in my opinion he is one of the finest law librarians in this country. He is currently Law Library Director and Professor of Law at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

7. Donna Bennett, *Effectively Managing the Human Side of Change*, 89 L. LIBR. J. 335, 344 (1997).

Phase Two—"Neutral Zone"

¶14 The second phase described by Bridges is the "neutral zone."⁸ It is characterized by a period of disenchantment and worry. The worker experiences doubts and fears. As was the case at the KU Law Library, the seemingly negative feelings of this phase often have nothing to do with the capabilities of the new personnel. (In our case the interim director did very well with a difficult situation.) It is a natural psychological phase that workers have to experience, one that is always present with change.

¶15 The magnitude of the disenchantment and worry, however, can be lowered with good transition management that foresees the problems that may arise as a result of the changes and works to avoid or lessen their impact. At this juncture, there is a need for leaders with sharpened social skills to keep workers from becoming disgruntled, suspicious, and even disloyal. People should be educated about this period of disenchantment and worry and about how to successfully surmount it.

¶16 At the KU Law Library there was substantial confusion during this second phase. For example, all faculty members but one had agreed with the former director's decision several years earlier to discontinue the library's subscription to the various coursebook series of the Practising Law Institute. The director satisfied the concerns of the dissenting faculty member by continuing the subscription to the series in that member's area of study. At its first meeting after the bearded one left, the Library Committee told the Interim Director to reinstate the entire subscription. Adding to the consternation caused by the reversal of a decision that had been universally accepted was the fact that most of the PLI handbooks had already left the library, sent to the Washburn Law Library in Topeka which had expressed interest in them once we made our initial decision. Fortunately, after the decision to reinstate occurred, Washburn agreed to return the books because they had not yet been catalogued. Disaster was averted (with the help of our strong-backed librarian who was willing to bring back boxes ad nauseam on her daily commute from Topeka to Lawrence), but the experience was unsettling to say the least.

¶17 This second phase can be thought of as a "no-man's land." In our situation, for example, we weren't in the past anymore with the bearded one, but nobody had yet taken his place. During this second phase, the dean brought in a director from another law library to serve as a consultant for three days. Our former director had over thirty years of law library experience and he had felt like we were doing a fine job. A law student survey had rated the law library as outstanding. So we were not sure what the consultant was going to suggest. By this

8. BRIDGES, *supra* note 2, at 34.

point staff members were becoming defensive about and self-protective of their work. After some anxious moments for us, we were told that the consultant was pretty satisfied with our library operations but that we would need to move everyone in the library to one floor, which we ultimately did.

¶18 The University of Kansas Law School Library management demonstrated considerable skill during this second transition stage. The interim and associate directors did outstanding jobs of reassuring and nurturing the workers. Both administrators publicly recognized good staff work, which helped morale. They also kept library staff informed of actions by the law school administration during this second phase. Workers need to be protected and encouraged as much as possible during the second phase. Robert Levering, author of *The 100 Best Companies to Work For in America*,⁹ stated in a recent interview: "Ultimately what is important is the nature of the management-employee relationship, not the details of the policies themselves. The very best policies in the world make no difference if they aren't well integrated with all other aspects of the company's relationship with employees."¹⁰

¶19 During this second phase, management should look for ways to protect and encourage workers who are feeling confused and vulnerable. One method is to conduct a social event for the workers going through the transition. This may be a dinner somewhere or just a get-together at someone's home; the main goal is to create an environment where staff can relax and get things off their chests in a nonwork setting. Surviving the tribulations of the second phase is cause enough for a celebration of some sort.

¶20 Another idea for encouraging workers is one I've borrowed from my wife who works with the federal government. Her manager presents "special act awards" for those who are going through change and doing a good job. My wife told me that they are real motivators even though they are nominal monetarily. An increase in pay is not always possible—but recognition can be a valuable incentive.

¶21 Bridges suggests using "reinforcements" during this second phase.¹¹ While I agree that they are very important for this critical period, I think "reinforcements" are a good idea at any time, regardless of the existence of change. The University of Kansas has adopted a review mechanism within the evaluation system for all employees. Checkpoints are scheduled by the employee and supervisor in which they review the employee's work. The process reinforces what the employee is doing well and provides an opportunity for feedback before the formal annual evaluation. This is something that is very appropriate at all times but

9. ROBERT LEVERING, *THE 100 BEST COMPANIES TO WORK FOR IN AMERICA* (1994).

10. Jennifer J. Laabs, *Expert Advice on How to Move Forward With Change*, PERSONNEL J., July 1996, at 54, 60.

11. BRIDGES, *supra* note 2, at 61.

especially useful during periods of intense change when any additional feedback for staff is very beneficial.

¶22 Although the second phase is marked by disenchantment and worry, it does not have to be a totally unproductive period. For instance, during our second phase, we achieved several of our short-range goals. The retired associate director, who the dean brought back for special assignments, established a “Friends of the KU Law Library” support group. Another short-range goal we accomplished involved meeting with all the professors to talk about collection development in the law library.

Phase Three—“New Beginning”

¶23 The third phase espoused by Bridges is the “new beginning,”¹² a time in which we plug ourselves into the new organization. For us at KU, this was the time when the new director stepped into her job. Of course, a new manager cannot create a “new beginning” just by turning on the faucet. There are certain things a leader can do, however, to help the workers make it through this third phase. Ideally the new manager or director will have a good vision of the future for the library—Bridges calls it “painting a picture” of how the outcomes will look and feel¹³—and will be able to convey this vision to the staff. To ensure loyalty among the troops, however, it is essential that the new manager be able not only to paint the picture, but also to logically explain *why* this new vision is the correct one for the library.

¶24 We’ve all heard the catch phrase for real estate: location, location, location. I think the catch phrase for successful library change is “vision, vision, vision.” The leader needs a good clear vision in order to gain commitment from the staff. A plan that can be broken down into steps can help give the workers an idea of where they are going. Indeed, it may help if the new director can involve the staff in developing his or her vision for the library. A new director will likely require workers to do things differently. This will be more palatable to them if the manager can give “each person a part to play,”¹⁴ making them feel that they are very much a part of the “new beginning.”

¶25 The fact is that even with a visionary for a leader, it is still going to be difficult. Like it or not, confusion still abounds in phase three. There is still anxiety. And there will be resistance. To meet these challenges, a new leader must, to recall the old standard, “accentuate the positive” during this period. One important way is to make sure that the benefits of change are made obvious to the staff. Their commitment to the new regime cannot even be imagined without all the

12. *Id.* at 52.

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

possible benefits being shared up front. Donna Bennett states: "[W]hen . . . our staffs are fully informed and involved, we often find that the change generates interest, fosters willingness to consider the change in a less emotionally charged atmosphere, and, quite often, elicits greater *commitment* to making the change successful."¹⁵

¶26 Meredith Fahey of Good Work Associates, Inc., contends that management's ability to effectively overcome the various obstacles to commitment which exist at this phase can produce loyalty in the worker.¹⁶ The first obstacle Fahey discusses is denial. Workers will try to stay focused on the past. Symptoms are distraction, withdrawal, and, consequently, low productivity. These symptoms were evident at our first librarian meeting with the new director. More than once the phrase "how we did it in the past" surfaced when the director suggested something new. An enlightened leader will help workers get through this stage by providing information as to what will happen, why it will happen, and what the likely impact will be.

¶27 The next obstacle to commitment Fahey discusses is resistance.¹⁷ The symptoms here are arguing, complaining, directing blame, disgust, and, again, low productivity. Our new director was not proposing anything radical at this stage, but it appeared to me as though what she was suggesting was risky. ("We've had these policies for years and now, all of a sudden, they're going to be changed?") The enlightened leader will deal with this stage by asking, listening, empathizing, and responding (without trying to fix).

¶28 If the leader can get the workers over the hurdles of denial and resistance, the workers will be "willing to explore." The symptoms here are starts and stops, new ideas, lack of focus, and lots of energy. The enlightened leader will help the worker get through this stage by clarifying goals, gathering input, prioritizing, and setting longer term goals. "Making it possible for others to have *input* into the way the change will develop and letting them know that their input is important will help to build commitment to the success of the change."¹⁸ The policy changes the new director was proposing were ones I came to consider, after first blush, as positive for the library. The director established trust in her judgment by allowing everyone to voice their opinions on library policies. Some were rewritten and everyone felt involved.

¶29 Another example of how our new director helped us surmount the obstacles to commitment was when she encouraged the staff to tell her how they wanted to arrange their desks, computers, files, furniture, drawers, etc., when moving

15. Bennett, *supra* note 7, at 337 (emphasis added).

16. UPSIDE DOWN AND INSIDE OUT: ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN LAW LIBRARIES, audiotope of program presented at 90th Annual Meeting, Am. Ass'n L. Libr., Baltimore, July 22, 1997 (Valencia, Calif., Mobiltape, 1997) (remarks of Meredith Fahey).

17. *Id.*

18. Bennett, *supra* note 7, at 338-39.

to one floor in response to the consultant's suggestion. This increased involvement for the staff made them feel part of the "new beginning."

¶30 The next level is commitment itself. The worker will cooperate at this stage, provide better focus, and produce at a higher level. The leader at this stage will be able to build teams and set long-term goals. However, it should be pointed out that not every worker goes through the stages at the same pace. Some may take weeks, some may take months, and some workers may never reach the commitment stage.

Conclusion

¶31 To survive change, an organization needs a leader with a vision who is willing to fight the good fight. It is certainly not easy. Bennett says: "Work with the resisters. Encourage them. Help them to understand how the change will assist them and stress how it will improve their skills. Ultimately, however, resisters must decide if they can adapt to the change or if they would be happier working elsewhere."¹⁹

¶32 Once change is attained, it might be time for extra training. Along with the manager's vision may come restructuring of positions as a way of achieving the vision. It is possible that new or restructured positions will not satisfy the needs or interests of some employees. If any are contemplating changing their personal goals in light of the changes, additional training can only benefit the worker looking for other opportunities. Enlightened management should do what it can to help employees who are not happy or want to expand their opportunities beyond those available in the restructured library. After all, it wasn't their fault that things changed as they did.

Postscript

¶33 At the KU Law Library we are sailing along nicely in the third stage. We have passed through "no-man's land." The new director has kept the communication going. There is a sense of accomplishment about how well we have managed change—new boss, new policies, new offices, new work area. The whole process has built character—the kind of character needed to deal with the next new wave of change that surely will break on our shore.

19. *Id.* at 348.

